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AUTHOR Thompson, Sydney
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failure. Many of the policy features could well guide other districts wishing to set up strict standards.

But false assumptions invalidate both policies. The belief that retention will remedy poor achievement is untenable. The new standards will force failures for no good purpose, and students will suffer to the extent that the policies are enforced. The policies are thus punitive in spite of their intentions.

Koons hits the heart of the matter in his response to Owen and Ranick. Social promotion is not a malignancy in public education, Koons states. If there is one, it is instead that of students "chafing against rigid, harsh standards that tend to degrade them." Greensville wants to force students to fit the schools with standards and sanctions, when what we really need is the reverse. We must make the schools, he concludes, fit the students.

A Social Promotion Policy

A policy of an opposite tenor can provide an alternative model for district practice. The policy of the Eugene, Oregon, schools sides with social promotion. Long an informal guideline, the policy was put into writing two years ago when the district was under pressure to tighten its standards.

The district desires continuous promotion for all in response to the research evidence and parts from this rule only when there is reason to believe retention might best meet a student's needs. In such instances, the principal, who has final authority, involves all interested parties in the decision-making. Parents may appeal a principal's decision before a district administrator.

Herman Lawson, administrative assistant for the district, explained that the district will deviate from social promotion in cases of developmental immaturity or prolonged absence from school. The district also believes that the earliest possible retention is best. It oppposes retention to correct academic difficulties.

To meet the needs of low achievers, the district also attempts to adapt its curriculum to students' achievement levels. It now offers, for instance, a basic reading course at the junior high level for students with reading problems.

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dents from Cheshire, Connecticut, who were retained in various grades, mostly in the primary grades. The authors included in their study only children whose retention had been determined solely on the basis of immaturity. All children had an intelligence quotient of at least ninety. The authors argued that many previous studies had found the retention experience unprofitable because they had uncritically included all failed children in their samples. It should be expected, they noted, that retention cannot remedy the problems of low ability and emotionally disturbed children.

Scott and Ames found that retention seemed to help their immature students' academic performance and behavior. All the children showed significant improvement in their class grades, and teachers rated the adjustment of 90 percent of the students as average, high, or very high. Parents also reported significant improvement in their children's social, emotional, and academic adjustment. The authors concluded that retention is the solution for children who are too immature for their grade and need time to develop.

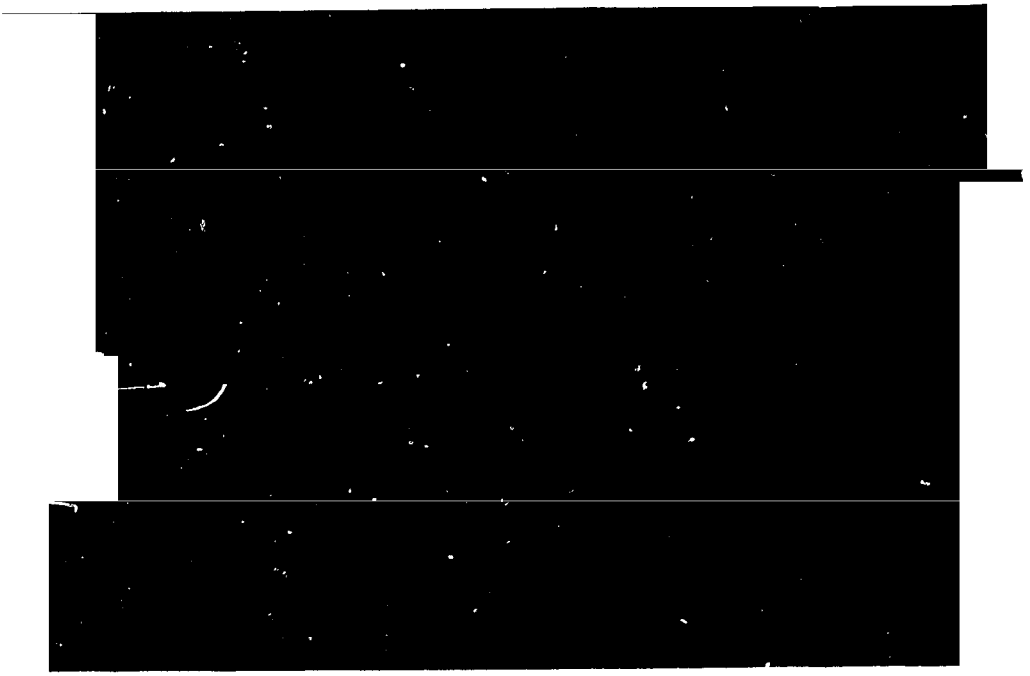
A recent study by Finlayson (1977) questions the belief

whom were retained twice) from the Bayless, Missouri, schools. The children were retained in grades one through eight. Some of the children were seriously disturbed.

Stringer found that the retention experience appeared to benefit her subjects. On the average, the students progressed much better during their retention than during their year of failure, although they slackened appreciably the year after retention. Some sixteen students showed losses rather than gains during the retention.

Stringer sought to determine what factors influenced student response to retention and found two criteria associated with favorable achievement during retention. These were an achievement lag of between 1.0 and 1.9 grade levels and a rate of progress less than half of normal.

To test these findings further, Stringer then chose for



The Ideal

The Eugene policy, we must add, falls short of the ideal. Social promotion is only a partial remedy to the standardization and artificiality of the group-based and graded curriculum. The problems of individual differences and poor achievement plead for increased individualization and a continuous progress curriculum. We must ask that educators pursue

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When Retention Might Work Best

Two additional studies are suggestive for their investigation of contextual variables and situations when retention might be most helpful. One is Stringer's (1960) analysis of fifty cases of retention (forty-eight children, two of whom were retained twice) from the Bayless, Missouri, schools. The children were retained in grades one through eight. Some of the children were seriously disturbed.

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CONCLUSION

The pressure for new standards and accountability has threatened the progressive gains of the sixties and challenged the hard-won practice of social promotion. Despite its force and conviction, this new conservative push rests on a weak foundation and offers no real critique of social promotion.

The research undermines any faith in strict promotion standards with these conclusions: retention does not help achievement, and it seems to hurt student adjustment. It also does not help motivation. And it does not seem to help schools either reduce the range of student abilities or raise school achievement. All reviewers of the research prefer a policy of social promotion over a policy of retention.

The best promotion policy short of the ideal of the continuous progress curriculum is one that calls for social promotion as the rule and permits an occasional retention when it appears to be in a child's best interest. Some research suggests that retention can benefit immature students, especially in the very early grades. But when schools are in doubt, they should promote rather than retain, as Goodlad advises. Schools should also fully involve parents, teachers, and specialists in retention decisions, and, as a precaution against discriminatory practice, they should be willing to meet the parents on the parents' own terms.

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children.

The problems experienced by the socially promoted students in the second year, Stringer continued, were likely brought on by the parents. The children's successful first year apparently reassured the parents too well and led them to relax their efforts too soon. The quality of parental concern, Stringer judged, also appeared to be a determining factor. Children whose parents seemed chiefly concerned with their children's well-being did better than children whose parents seemed chiefly motivated by their own hurt pride.

Stringer concluded that when parents cannot work with the school, retention can help those failing students who meet her two progress criteria. For first and second graders, she added, her first criterion can be amended to specify achievement lags of 0.3 and 0.7 grade levels, respectively.

This study well illustrates Jackson's concerns with the research on retention. Stringer's initial analysis of the retention experience employs a flawed design without a control. When Stringer does use a control of socially promoted students, she invalidates her first judgment; the socially promoted students, she finds, do as well as the

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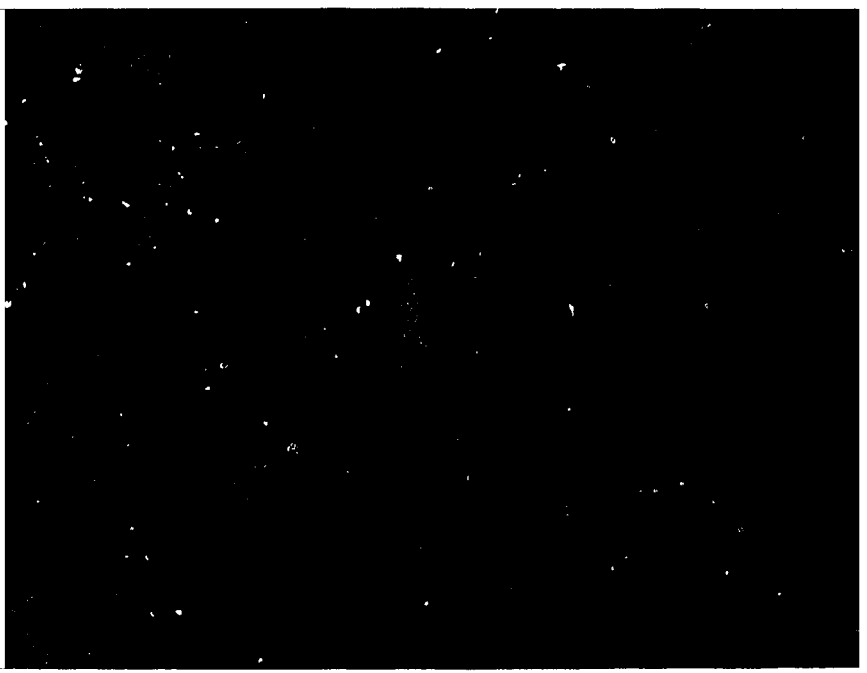

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the authors found several variables to be significantly associated with satisfactory achievement. One was the grade level of retention. Over 80 percent of the first graders made satisfactory achievement, whereas more than half of the second- and third-grade repeaters showed only fair or poor achievement. This finding, they noted, supports the common notion that retention is most helpful and least risky early in a child's schooling.

Three additional findings were pertinent to the association of grade level and achievement. First, most of the children showed learning difficulty from the beginning of their schooling. Second, parental attitudes toward retention tended to be more negative for second and third graders than for first graders. And third, principals offered different reasons for retention for second and third graders than for first graders. For the former they tended to cite academic reasons, but for the latter they usually cited emotional and behavioral reasons, particularly immaturity.

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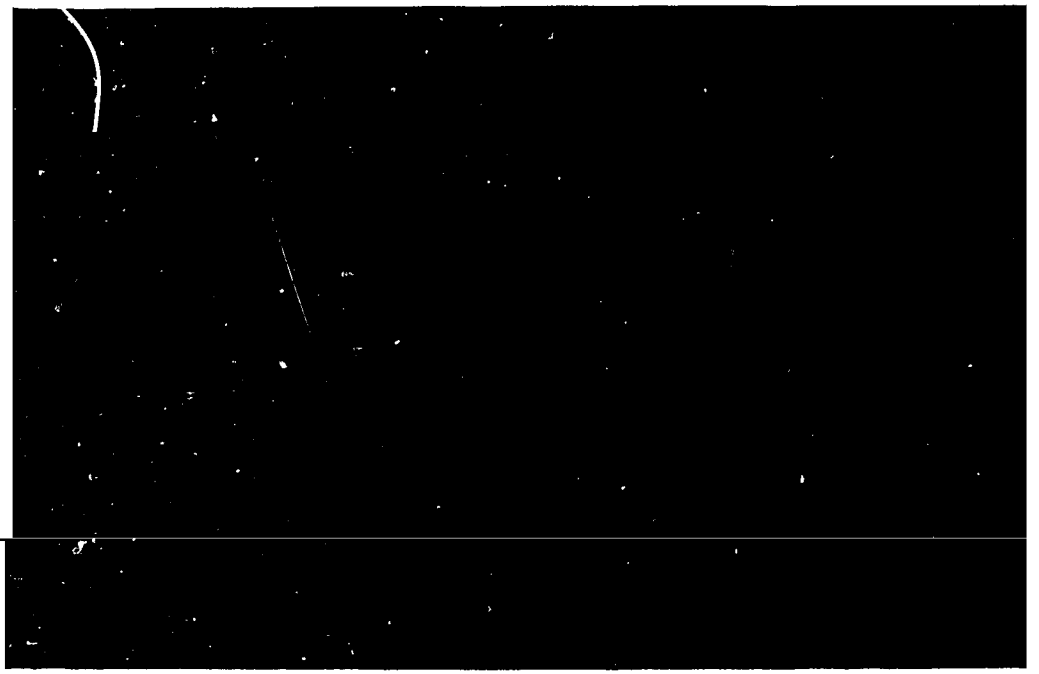

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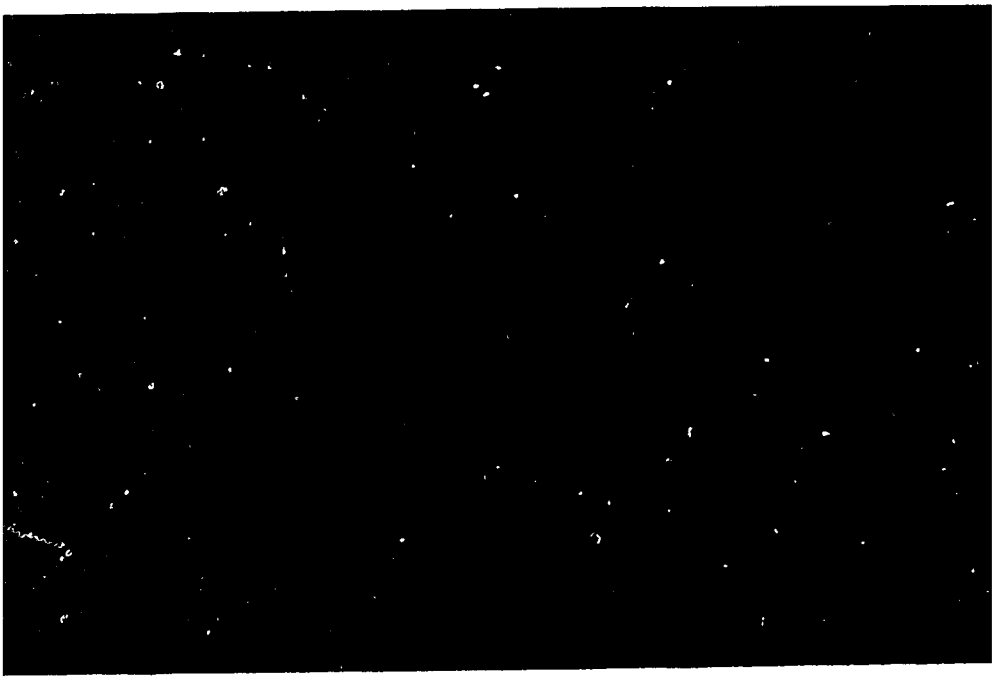
Deci's (1975) research on intrinsic motivation, or the desire to complete a task for its own sake, supports McGregor and Washburn. A number of laboratory studies led Deci to conclude that external rewards and punishments that serve mainly to control behavior subvert people's natural intrinsic motivation, which is dependent on feelings of competence and self-determination. Among the most destructive external controls are contingent payments and threats. Such external controls, Deci explains, shift the origin of motivation from within the person to the controls themselves and damage self-determination; the rewards, and not the person's own interest, become the reason for action. In the end, the natural interest in the work at hand is replaced by a desire to get the rewards for the least effort.



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dents will not learn unless forced to do so, and until a wide variety of educational practices provide the force." Washburn finds an alternative approach more apt—one that assumes children are "active, creative, and eager to learn, until the desire to learn has been extinguished by the schools." Challenge and encouragement, rather than sanctions, cultivate this motivation.

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two groups of schools showed no difference in the ranges of specific abilities for eleven subject areas in individual seventh-grade classes.

A later study provides more equivocal evidence. Kowitz and Armstrong (1961) picked two similar New York districts with strict and loose retention policies and compared the percentages of students in each district who performed above and below expected patterns of achievement. They found that the school with the high retention rate had a significantly higher proportion of students who achieved beyond expectation. The increase in achievement, however, was largely limited to students who were never in danger of failing. The authors also noted that the strict retention policy did nothing to help

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INTERVIEW

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additional members of the nuclear family who had been retained.

Pottorff (1978) drew a similar profile of retained students when he compared sixty-five retained students with a random sample of sixty-five of their promoted peers. His subjects were first graders from eight schools in a metropolitan central Michigan city. The characteristics holding the greatest value in predicting a student's retention, he found, were the tendencies to (1) belong to a minority race, (2) come from a large family, (3) have a mother with poor education, (4) come from a home of separated or divorced parents, (5) be poor in reading, and (6) be poor in mathematics.

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The competency movement sets up precise learning objectives in advance and makes teaching and evaluation, as well as student progress and graduation, closely dependent on them. Its aspiration to scientific precision is apparent in Spady's definition of competency-based education as "a data-based, adaptive, performance-oriented set of integrated processes that facilitate, measure, record and certify within the context of flexible time parameters the demonstration of known, explicitly stated, and agreed upon learning outcomes that reflect successful functioning in life roles."

Such an approach to education has drawn several criticisms, of which Bowers's seems the most apt and comprehensive. Bowers criticizes competency-based education for its expression of what he calls our technocratic ideology, our taken-for-granted world view that fuses science, technology, and bureaucracy. This ideology structures our consciousness to see reality in terms of mechanical production, quantifiable

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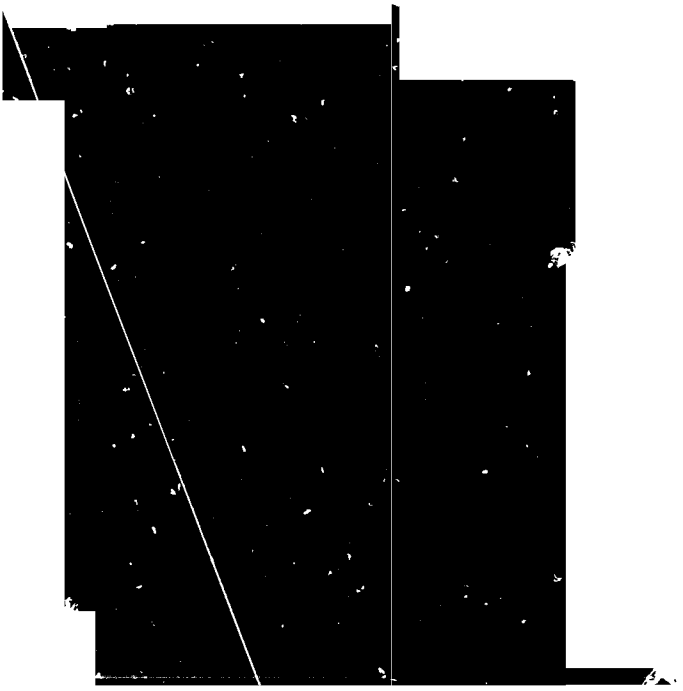

emotion. It is informed by a fundamental desire to return to imagined tradition and discipline. Pursell pointedly speaks of the basics program that he helped organize as "school as most of us knew it when we were children." Like competency-based education, but much more crudely, this movement seeks an education of control in place of an education of liberation.

Somewhere in between the reactionary will of the back-to-basics movement and the rigorous theory of competency-based education has been the competency-testing movement. This latter movement has taken the standards of competency-based education, but paid less attention to its concerns with learning goals and instruction. It shares the defects of both its siblings.

The competency-testing movement, Pipho reports, has now hit all states in some form. Some thirty-three states have mandated proficiency standards for elementary and secondary students, and the remaining states have legislation pending or studies in progress. Although the starting dates for many of the new programs are still far away, some serious problems have already emerged. These include uneven

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ditions of retained students. This design is flawed and biased toward retention, since it does not control for any factors other than retention that could influence student improvement. It not only fails to evaluate the effects of retention relative to promotion, but also fails to evaluate the effects of retention itself.

The third basic design compares groups of problem students who are experimentally assigned to either promotion or retention. It alone is sound.

Studies of the first design have tended to support social promotion, whereas studies of the second design have tended to support retention. We cannot be sure to what extent their results reflect reality or their inherent biases, Jackson argues. Only three early studies (the most recent dating from 1941) have used the third design, and they show no dramatic pattern of results. Together they provide only one statistically significant comparison favoring promotion.

Additional weaknesses also mar the research, Jackson notes. Many studies have not used large and diverse enough samples to permit broad generalization. Nor have they carefully defined the promotion and retention treatments under study or examined long-term as well as short-term effects. Many studies have also failed to examine the interaction among the many contextual variables at work, such as student characteristics, school characteristics, and reasons for retention.

Jackson calls for future research of a much higher quality than that of the past. For the present, Jackson states, we are left with doubt over the real effects of retention and social promotion and the interaction of contextual variables.

Some Studies Favoring Social Promotion

Let us now survey some of the research studies themselves. We need to keep Jackson's analysis in mind, for all the studies show one or more of the weaknesses he describes.

One of the standard studies of the effects of retention and social promotion on achievement is that by Dobbs and Neville (1967). The authors followed the achievement gains of sixty first graders from eight low socioeconomic, urban schools for two years of their schooling. Half of the children

were retained in the first grade, and the other half were promoted to the second grade. The children were matched according to their age, race, sex, socioeconomic status, type of classroom assignment, mental ability, and reading achievement at the end of their first year of school. Most of the children were slow learners.

Dobbs and Neville found that the promoted students made significantly greater gains in reading achievement each year of the study and significantly greater gains in arithmetic achievement over the two-year period. They concluded that retention may be not only futile, but actually harmful to achievement.

Another study by Abidin, Golladay, and Howerton (1971) followed student achievement through six grades. The authors studied eighty-five children who were retained in either the first or second grade and forty-three children who scored below the twenty-fifth percentile on the Metropolitan Readiness Test but who were never retained. All the students attended one small southeastern urban school system. The authors collected their data from school records during the students' sixth-grade year.

In their first year of schooling, the two groups of students were very much alike. They showed no significant differences in teacher ratings of academic promise, conduct grades, and subject matter grades.

Although the retained students' subject matter grades dropped during their year of first-grade retention, the two groups showed no significant differences in grades during their second- and third-grade years. Retained second graders showed no difference in grades between their year of repetition and year of failure.

But unsettling differences did appear in the later elementary years. During their first six grades, the retained students' achievement and ability dropped relative to those of the promoted students. The retention thus seemed to harm the students long afterward. The authors concluded that children who are retained suffer a continuing deterioration in both achievement and intelligence.

Studies have linked retention and negative attitudes towards school, poor personal adjustment, and poor social adjustment. A recent study by White and Howard (1973) is

representative of research implicating retention for its harm to self-concept. The authors used data collected by the North Carolina Advancement School on 624 sixth graders from a variety of North Carolina school systems. They divided their subjects into three groups for analysis: those who had never failed a grade, those who had failed once, and those who had failed more than once.

When the authors compared the students' self-concept scores, they found that failure was significantly related to lower self-concept and that this relationship was most pronounced for the students who had failed more than once. A low correlation between students' self-concept scores and intelligence, they noted, indicated that intelligence had little to do with the variance in self-concept scores.

Some Support for Retention

But the evidence has not been uniform. Some studies have found retention to hold a beneficial effect. Among them is the Scott and Ames study (1969) of twenty-seven elementary students from Cheshire, Connecticut, who were retained in various grades, mostly in the primary grades. The authors included in their study only children whose retention had been determined solely on the basis of immaturity. All children had an intelligence quotient of at least ninety. The authors argued that many previous studies had found the retention experience unprofitable because they had uncritically included all failed children in their samples. It should be expected, they noted, that retention cannot remedy the problems of low ability and emotionally disturbed children.

Scott and Ames found that retention seemed to help their immature students' academic performance and behavior. All the children showed significant improvement in their class grades, and teachers rated the adjustment of 90 percent of the students as average, high, or very high. Parents also reported significant improvement in their children's social, emotional, and academic adjustment. The authors concluded that retention is the solution for children who are too immature for their grade and need time to develop.

A recent study by Finlayson (1977) questions the belief

that retention fosters low self-concept. His two-year study followed first graders from two suburban districts near Philadelphia from the outset of their schooling through their second year. Finlayson compared the self-concepts of seventy-five regularly promoted students, retained students, and promoted borderline students who showed the same characteristics as the retained students.

Finlayson found that the retention did not create self-concept problems. The self-concept scores for all three groups of students rose during their first year. During their second year, the retained students continued to increase their scores significantly, while the borderline and promoted students showed slight, but not significant, drops in their scores. The scores of the latter two groups still remained slightly higher than those of the retained students. The encouraging self-concept scores of the retained students were matched by the judgments of parents and teachers, who felt that the retention was not harmful and most often beneficial for the students.

When Retention Might Work Best

Two additional studies are suggestive for their investigation of contextual variables and situations when retention might be most helpful. One is Stringer's (1960) analysis of fifty cases of retention (forty-eight children, two of whom were retained twice) from the Bayless, Missouri, schools. The children were retained in grades one through eight. Some of the children were seriously disturbed.

Stringer found that the retention experience appeared to benefit her subjects. On the average, the students progressed much better during their retention than during their year of failure, although they slackened appreciably the year after retention. Some sixteen students showed losses rather than gains during the retention.

Stringer sought to determine what factors influenced student response to retention and found two criteria associated with favorable achievement during retention. These were an achievement lag of between 1.0 and 1.9 grade levels and a rate of progress less than half of normal.

To test these findings further, Stringer then chose for

comparison ten retained and forty-one socially promoted students from among the students meeting her two criteria. Both groups, she discovered, improved greatly during the first year of treatment. The socially promoted students improved from an average of 2 percent of normal progress to an average of 97 percent; the retained students improved from an average of 19 percent to one of 99 percent. In the second year, eleven of the socially promoted students failed again. The other socially promoted students progressed at an average rate of 84 percent, comparable to the 87 percent progress rate of the retained students.

Parental attitudes influenced these results, Stringer believed. The initial retention and promotion decisions, she explained, were largely dependent on parental responses. In more than forty of the fifty cases of retention, the parents made (or could make) no effort on behalf of their children. For all but three of the cases of social promotion, however, the parents intervened. They came to school, opposed retention, accepted responsibility for their children's learning, and invested genuine concern and effort to help their children.

The problems experienced by the socially promoted students in the second year, Stringer continued, were likely brought on by the parents. The children's successful first year apparently reassured the parents too well and led them to relax their efforts too soon. The quality of parental concern, Stringer judged, also appeared to be a determining factor. Children whose parents seemed chiefly concerned with their children's well-being did better than children whose parents seemed chiefly motivated by their own hurt pride.

Stringer concluded that when parents cannot work with the school, retention can help those failing students who meet her two progress criteria. For first and second graders, she added, her first criterion can be amended to specify achievement lags of 0.3 and 0.7 grade levels, respectively.

This study well illustrates Jackson's concerns with the research on retention. Stringer's initial analysis of the retention experience employs a flawed design without a control. When Stringer does use a control of socially promoted students, she invalidates her first judgment; the socially promoted students, she finds, do as well as the

retained students. Her choice of a control, however, does not completely remedy the situation for Jackson. The fact of social promotion suggests differences between the two groups of students. The study's second-year followup is also notable, for the second-year results change our judgment of the students' success. Most studies have confined themselves to a single year.

Reinherz and Griffin (1970) followed Stringer's lead in their attempt to find out what factors contribute to successful retention experiences. They took for their subjects fifty-seven primary boys, from several Quincy, Massachusetts, schools, who were repeating a grade for the first time. All the boys had at least normal intelligence.

The majority of the students, they found, made satisfactory achievement and progress during the retention. Thirty-six earned satisfactory achievement at grade level, while twenty-one had either poor or fair achievement. Thirty-eight made much progress or improved over past levels, while nineteen made only little or some progress.

In further analysis of their subjects' retention experience, the authors found several variables to be significantly associated with satisfactory achievement. One was the grade level of retention. Over 80 percent of the first graders made satisfactory achievement, whereas more than half of the second- and third-grade repeaters showed only fair or poor achievement. This finding, they noted, supports the common notion that retention is most helpful and least risky early in a child's schooling.

Three additional findings were pertinent to the association of grade level and achievement. First, most of the children showed learning difficulty from the beginning of their schooling. Second, parental attitudes toward retention tended to be more negative for second and third graders than for first graders. And third, principals offered different reasons for retention for second and third graders than for first graders. For the former they tended to cite academic reasons, but for the latter they usually cited emotional and behavioral reasons, particularly immaturity.

Reinherz and Griffin also found that emotional and social stability were linked with satisfactory student progress. Students showing good social and emotional adjustment and

students having good peer relations usually made good progress.

The study's most important finding was its association of satisfactory achievement and immaturity. Children characterized as immature, the authors found, tended to achieve better during retention than children showing less sign of immaturity. This finding concurs with the common belief that retention can best help normal, but immature, children who need time to develop their abilities.

The Question of Motivation

Although the impact of retention on student achievement and adjustment has received the most attention from researchers, other issues have drawn some interest. One of these is the effect of retention policies on motivation.

No one argues any longer that retention will help motivate problem students. It is clear now that failure is self-perpetuating. Students who feel they are failures, Glasser stresses, behave as failures to solidify their identities as failures.

But what effect does the possibility of retention have? Most people assume that the threat of retention is necessary to keep at least some students working hard. Only one study has specifically addressed the threat of failure, and it found that such a threat had no impact on achievement.

Otto and Melby (1935) studied the impact of the threat of failure on 352 students in eighteen second- and fifth-grade classes from four northern Illinois school systems. The classes were divided into control and experimental classes for a one-semester study. Control group teachers informed their students throughout the semester that any student who did not work hard and do well would have to repeat the year. Experimental group teachers similarly informed their students that they would all be promoted. The two messages were incorporated into the normal routine of the classes so that they would be clearly understood by the students but not appear sudden or extraordinary.

The authors tested the students at the beginning and end of the semester and found no significant differences in

achievement gains between the two groups. Neither teacher differences nor differences in student ability confounded the results. In accord with the test results, the experimental group teachers generally felt that the lack of the threat of failure did not affect the work or attitudes of their students.

This one, dated study cannot resolve the issue, but its findings are supported by a body of theory and research on motivation. At the root of the issue are two contradictory views of human nature, which McGregor has described. One is the traditional view that human nature is basically depraved and that people are unmotivated or destructively motivated unless molded by outside force. A second view, supported by much recent research, holds that people are naturally motivated for productive ends and that outside controls often act to contaminate this motivation.

Washburn, seconding McGregor's support for the latter view of human nature, applies this framework in his analysis of the back-to-basics movement. Its faith in standards and sanctions, he argues, misguidedly assumes that "most students will not learn unless forced to do so, and until a wide variety of educational practices provide the force." Washburn finds an alternative approach more apt—one that assumes children are "active, creative, and eager to learn, until the desire to learn has been extinguished by the schools." Challenge and encouragement, rather than sanctions, cultivate this motivation.

Deci's (1975) research on intrinsic motivation, or the desire to complete a task for its own sake, supports McGregor and Washburn. A number of laboratory studies led Deci to conclude that external rewards and punishments that serve mainly to control behavior subvert people's natural intrinsic motivation, which is dependent on feelings of competence and self-determination. Among the most destructive external controls are contingent payments and threats. Such external controls, Deci explains, shift the origin of motivation from within the person to the controls themselves and damage self-determination; the rewards, and not the person's own interest, become the reason for action. In the end, the natural interest in the work at hand is replaced by a desire to get the rewards for the least effort.

School Achievement and Classroom Homogeneity

Two additional issues—the effects of retention policies on school achievement and the achievement range of classmates—have occasioned some research. Educators have sometimes justified strict retention policies with the belief that they produce more homogeneous classes and raise school achievement. But the research evidence questions both claims.

The few studies on classroom homogeneity all conclude that strict policies do not reduce the range of student abilities and achievement within the classroom.

Sparse research on retention and school achievement has brought mixed results. Despite the current interest in the issue, we should be cautious in making judgments. School-effects research in general, Thompson argues in *Class Size*, has proved problematic and offered only untrustworthy findings.

A study by Cook (1941) addresses both issues. Starting with data on 148 small Minnesota school systems, Cook compared eighteen schools with high and low ratios of seventh-grade overageness (indicating strict and loose retention policies). A random sampling of students from the two groups of schools showed that the students were enough alike in intelligence and achievement to be considered part of the same population. Cook found the seventh-grade students in the low-ratio schools to be superior in intelligence and achievement in all subjects but one. He also found that the two groups of schools showed no difference in the ranges of specific abilities for eleven subject areas in individual seventh-grade classes.

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the failing students, for the retained students continued to lag behind in achievement, even when compared with students a year younger and less experienced.

What We Can Conclude

What judgment does this varied research demand? Some evidence argues that retention sometimes helps students, particularly immature students early in their schooling. But reviewers and much of the best evidence tell us that as a rule retention is less desirable than social promotion. The evidence often links retention to serious student harm and questions all the claims made in support of strict retention policies.

Jackson's criticism of the research encourages skepticism, but it does not reduce us to degree zero. Jackson's own final words provide us with our most cautious conclusion. The research, he finds, offers "no reliable body of evidence to indicate that grade retention is more beneficial than grade promotion for students with serious academic or adjustment difficulties." Educators who fail students, he warns, "*do so without valid research evidence*" that such action will prove more helpful than promotion to the next grade.

A PATTERN OF DISCRIMINATORY PRACTICE

Some additional descriptive research on the practice of retention requires our attention. Several studies provide disturbing evidence of a pattern of discriminatory practice in which lower-class and minority children are retained in disproportionate numbers. The practice of retention, it appears, mirrors social inequalities.

A few studies illuminate the problem. Reinherz and Griffin, for example, found that, among their subjects, primarily the lower-class children were retained. Only seven of the fifty-seven families in the study were in the upper three social classes, while the remaining fifty belonged to the bottom two classes. The retained children were also alike in their tendency to have fathers with low educational levels. The authors also found evidence of a familial pattern of retention. Forty-seven of the families had one or more additional members of the nuclear family who had been retained.

Pottorff (1978) drew a similar profile of retained students when he compared sixty-five retained students with a random sample of sixty-five of their promoted peers. His subjects were first graders from eight schools in a metropolitan central Michigan city. The characteristics holding the greatest value in predicting a student's retention, he found, were the tendencies to (1) belong to a minority race, (2) come from a large family, (3) have a mother with poor education, (4) come from a home of separated or divorced parents, (5) be poor in reading, and (6) be poor in mathematics.

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Further evidence from the study by Abidin, Golladay, and Howertown provides us with our strongest condemn-

ation of retention practices. The authors' retained and promoted students showed no initial differences in teacher ratings, subject matter grades, or conduct grades. The reasons given for retention, the authors added, were generally not spelled out. Records revealed that 28 percent of the students were retained because of immaturity, 32 percent because of academic failure, 16 percent for miscellaneous reasons, and 24 percent for no specified reasons. The vagueness of the reasons suggested the lack of any clear rationale.

The determining factors, it appeared, were race, sex, and socioeconomic status. The authors found that black male children from low socioeconomic families with working mothers and absent fathers stood greatly increased chances for retention. They concluded that "retention is largely a de facto discriminatory policy against the poor."

This study helps us read the findings of Stringer. Abidin and his colleagues concur with Stringer that parental responsiveness can be an important factor in retention decisions. But while Stringer stresses the lack of cooperation from the parents of her retained subjects, Abidin and his colleagues emphasize the inability of low socioeconomic parents to cooperate with the school on its terms.

PROMOTION POLICY ALTERNATIVES

Our discussion of the research and the history of retentention policies has prepared us for our final task of evaluating current policy alternatives. Educators now have two general alternatives from which to choose. One is an accommodation to the accountability and standards reaction, and the other is the preservation of the progressive reforms of the sixties. The latter offers the only defensible choice.

The Standards and Accountability Movement

Before turning to school district practices, we need to briefly analyze the larger standards movement itself. For all its manifestations, the new movement has followed two basic pathways. The first has been the attempt to rationalize education further along the lines of the industrial model of production. This attempt is more fully realized in competency-based education, which seeks to redefine education in terms of measurable output.

The competency movement sets up precise learning objectives in advance and makes teaching and evaluation, as well as student progress and graduation, closely dependent on them. Its aspiration to scientific precision is apparent in Spady's definition of competency-based education as "a data-based, adaptive, performance-oriented set of integrated processes that facilitate, measure, record and certify within the context of flexible time parameters the demonstration of known, explicitly stated, and agreed upon learning outcomes that reflect successful functioning in life roles."

Such an approach to education has drawn several criticisms, of which Bowers's seems the most apt and comprehensive. Bowers criticizes competency-based education for its expression of what he calls our technocratic ideology, our taken-for-granted world view that fuses science, technology, and bureaucracy. This ideology structures our consciousness to see reality in terms of mechanical production, quantifiable

measurement, and technological problem-solving that considers only expertise and denies issues of values. Such thinking deceptively restricts our consciousness with political results: it grants present values the status of objectivity and produces a passive acceptance of the present socioeconomic order.

Even though Spady and other advocates of competency-based education may show concern for individual needs and values, their creation, Bowers warns, is dangerous. It threatens to reduce teaching and learning to a mechanical process and form "an encapsulated technological universe where only technological and management problems are real." In its attention to "product" and "output" it ignores "the individual who experiences existence as problematic." The individual becomes merely a component of the system and his or her experiences components to be measured in a search for greater system efficiency.

A second pathway has been followed by the back-to-basics movement, which eschews technology for faith and emotion. It is informed by a fundamental desire to return to imagined tradition and discipline. Pursell pointedly speaks of the basics program that he helped organize as "school as most of us knew it when we were children." Like competency-based education, but much more crudely, this movement seeks an education of control in place of an education of liberation.

Somewhere in between the reactionary will of the back-to-basics movement and the rigorous theory of competency-based education has been the competency-testing movement. This latter movement has taken the standards of competency-based education, but paid less attention to its concerns with learning goals and instruction. It shares the defects of both its siblings.

The competency-testing movement, Pipho reports, has now hit all states in some form. Some thirty-three states have mandated proficiency standards for elementary and secondary students, and the remaining states have legislation pending or studies in progress. Although the starting dates for many of the new programs are still far away, some serious problems have already emerged. These include uneven

implementation efforts, lack of financial support for the new programs, and confusion over the nature of the learning goals. Once enthusiastically received, the new movement, Pipho judges, "has clearly become an idea fraught with contradictions and controversy."

Two Retention Policies

A look at two districts' promotion policies will illustrate the practice of the competency-testing and back-to-basics movements. The two policies are identical in their demands that achievement determine promotion, though they adopt different tones and provide students with different safeguards.

The Dade County, Florida, Public Schools established new promotion standards three years ago, just before Florida passed its minimum competency law. The Dade County policy grounds promotion in achievement of specified learning goals that emphasize the basic skills, though it permits schools to give some consideration in promotional decisions to students' general progress, responsibility, attendance, mental and physical health, maturity, work habits, and attitudes. The new policy seeks to ensure that all promoted students "can benefit from the next grade level of instruction" and that all graduates "have sufficient basic skills to function effectively in the community." The policy's abundant safeguards also profess "to provide each student with the maximum opportunity to succeed in school."

The district spells out minimum achievement levels necessary for promotion from each grade. Students must also satisfy statewide proficiency standards in reading, writing, and mathematics for promotion from the third, fifth, eighth, and eleventh grades.

Students who do not meet grade standards are to be retained or assigned to a special program, such as an alternative school, a special class within the regular program, or a summer program. The schools must provide failing students with instruction leading to skill mastery. Retained students may receive promotion in midyear if they make up their lost ground.

Except in unusual circumstances, the schools are to retain students only once in the primary grades, once in the intermediate grades, and once in the junior high grades. Students already retained once may receive irregular promotion.

The district must notify parents in writing and offer a teacher conference when it becomes apparent that a student is experiencing difficulty. All retained students are to receive counseling, and any student who is to be retained a second time is to be evaluated by specialists.

The Dade County policy also permits non-English-speaking students to meet some of their promotion requirements in their native language, though graduation requires proficiency in English.

A more direct and self-assured policy guides the Greensville County, Virginia, schools. Adopted six years ago in response to public dissatisfaction and poor achievement, the district's back-to-basics program has tightened up loose policies with the radical surgery demanded by Owen and Ranick. Strict promotion standards refuse social promotion: no student is to be promoted until mastering the skills of his or her grade level. Student evaluations are based entirely on the mastery of skills, and standardized test scores play an important role in evaluation. New proficiency-based graduation requirements accompany the promotion standards.

The surgery, Owen and Ranick maintain, has been achieved without harming the instructional program. The district attends to the diagnosis of students' individual strengths and weaknesses, provides intensive instruction to meet the needs of slower students, and seeks an atmosphere of success so that all students may reach the new standards. Retained students are not placed in the same classrooms with newly promoted students, but are instead grouped with other students of their age. Partial promotions are available for students who achieve most of the skills of their grade. The district has also greatly expanded its learning opportunities at the secondary level.

What are we to make of these policies? Both appear well-intentioned and reasonable. Both districts clothe their standards in the language of progressive education and adopt procedural and curricular safeguards to soften the problem of

failure. Many of the policy features could well guide other districts wishing to set up strict standards.

But false assumptions invalidate both policies. The belief that retention will remedy poor achievement is untenable. The new standards will force failures for no good purpose, and students will suffer to the extent that the policies are enforced. The policies are thus punitive in spite of their intentions.

Koons hits the heart of the matter in his response to Owen and Ranick. Social promotion is not a malignancy in public education, Koons states. If there is one, it is instead that of students "chafing against rigid, harsh standards that tend to degrade them." Greensville wants to force students to fit the schools with standards and sanctions, when what we really need is the reverse. We must make the schools, he concludes, fit the students.

A Social Promotion Policy

A policy of an opposite tenor can provide an alternative model for district practice. The policy of the Eugene, Oregon, schools sides with social promotion. Long an informal guideline, the policy was put into writing two years ago when the district was under pressure to tighten its standards.

The district desires continuous promotion for all in response to the research evidence and parts from this rule only when there is reason to believe retention might best meet a student's needs. In such instances, the principal, who has final authority, involves all interested parties in the decision-making. Parents may appeal a principal's decision before a district administrator.

Herman Lawson, administrative assistant for the district, explained that the district will deviate from social promotion in cases of developmental immaturity or prolonged absence from school. The district also believes that the earliest possible retention is best. It oppposes retention to correct academic difficulties.

To meet the needs of low achievers, the district also attempts to adapt its curriculum to students' achievement levels. It now offers, for instance, a basic reading course at the junior high level for students with reading problems.

The Ideal

The Eugene policy, we must add, falls short of the ideal. Social promotion is only a partial remedy to the standardization and artificiality of the group-based and graded curriculum. The problems of individual differences and poor achievement plead for increased individualization and a continuous progress curriculum. We must ask that educators pursue these goals to the end that schools do truly fit children's needs and release as fully as possible children's natural motivation for learning.

CONCLUSION

The pressure for new standards and accountability has threatened the progressive gains of the sixties and challenged the hard-won practice of social promotion. Despite its force and conviction, this new conservative push rests on a weak foundation and offers no real critique of social promotion.

The research undermines any faith in strict promotion standards with these conclusions: retention does not help achievement, and it seems to hurt student adjustment. It also does not help motivation. And it does not seem to help schools either reduce the range of student abilities or raise school achievement. All reviewers of the research prefer a policy of social promotion over a policy of retention.

The best promotion policy short of the ideal of the continuous progress curriculum is one that calls for social promotion as the rule and permits an occasional retention when it appears to be in a child's best interest. Some research suggests that retention can benefit immature students, especially in the very early grades. But when schools are in doubt, they should promote rather than retain, as Goodlad advises. Schools should also fully involve parents, teachers, and specialists in retention decisions, and, as a precaution against discriminatory practice, they should be willing to meet the parents on the parents' own terms.

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